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SUPERVISING COLLEGE STUDENTS' USE OF ENGLISH

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Under the efficient direction of Professor Jacob Zeitlin, the Committee on College Policy of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences of the University of Illinois has been conducting an extended and careful investigation of the problem of supervising the college students' oral and written English. This Committee sent a questionnaire to other universities and colleges, considered carefully the special problems to be solved at the University of Illinois, and made the following recommendations to the college faculty:

1. That the Senate provide for a committee on students' English, to be appointed by the Council of Administration. This committee shall consist of five or more members and its chief function shall be the maintenance of uniformity in the tests to be applied to unsatisfactory English.
2. This committee shall have the services of a paid secretary whose duty it shall be to manage all the routine connected with the work of this committee, and to supervise the special instruction which may be necessary.
3. At the beginning of each semester the secretary of the committee shall issue notices to all instructors, explaining the object of the committee and the manner in which the standard in the use of English is to be enforced.
4. At a stated time in each semester instructors shall be asked to make reports, on blanks provided for the purpose, on all students whose use of English, whether oral or written, is unsatisfactory. Each report shall be accompanied by the evidence on which it is based. Provision may also be made for reporting at other than the stated time.
5. The committee shall examine the evidence of the student's deficiency, and if, in its opinion, the student is in need of further instruction, he shall be placed in the care of the secretary.
6. The secretary shall determine the kind of instruction suited to each particular case. He may prescribe work to the students individually or he may organize special classes which the students shall attend until their English is satisfactory. No credit is to be given for this additional work. Any student whose use of English continues unsatisfactory to the committee shall not be recommended for a degree.

7. The secretary shall have the right to ask any instructor for samples of the written work of any student about whom he may desire information. He shall have access to term papers, notebooks, examination books, or any other material of the sort.

REPORT OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE COMMITTEE ON COLLEGE POLICY ON
A PLAN FOR MAINTAINING A STANDARD IN THE USE OF ENGLISH
BY STUDENTS IN THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

The subcommittee which was appointed by the Committee on College Policy to investigate the practice of other colleges and universities in guarding the use of the English language by their students and to propose a plan for the University of Illinois, addressed a communication to some forty representative institutions of the country, containing the following questions:

1. Do you aim to keep officially informed of the written or oral English of students throughout their college career in courses other than those given by the departments of English and rhetoric?
2. Have you a definite plan for taking care of students whose deficiency in written or oral English is conspicuous?
3. Has your plan worked satisfactorily?
4. Do you withhold the degree from students who fail to attain a reasonable standard of accuracy in their use of the vernacular?

Replies were received from thirty-three, herewith enumerated: Brown University, Carleton College, Case School of Applied Science, University of California, University of Chicago, University of Cincinnati, College of the City of New York, Columbia University, Cornell, Dartmouth, Grinnell, Harvard, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Leland Stanford, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New York University, Northwestern, Oberlin, Ohio State, University of Pennsylvania, Princeton, Texas, University of Virginia, State College of Washington, Washington University of St. Louis, Wisconsin, Western Reserve, Yale.

With a few exceptions the replies reveal the existence of a marked interest in the problem and a more or less earnest effort to grapple with it. Most of the institutions, however, express only a half-hearted faith, or even less, in the schemes which they have devised for remedying the evils in the use of English by their students. The requirement of a special entrance examination in English, such as is made by Leland Stanford and Pennsylvania, is doubtless a wholesome one; but it is inapplicable to our own conditions and it is looked upon as only an approximate solution of the problem by the universities that enforce the requirement. The University of Missouri gives its students an examination in English in the Junior year, a practice which, according to Dean Jones, works satisfactorily, but which other close witnesses do not regard as altogether fair in its operation and which is, furthermore, unsupported by the practice of other institutions.

The most familiar procedure is to impose additional work in composition on students who have been reported as defective in expression. This may take

a variety of forms ranging in efficiency and thoroughness from a perfunctory regulation, printed in the college announcement and unheeded by faculty and students, to the most careful system of surveillance by which responsibility is concentrated in the hands of a special committee and the support of every instructor in the college is utilized.

The simplest plan is that of printing a statement in the Announcement requiring instructors to report to the dean of the college or to the department of English deficiencies in the use of English by their students. This method has the advantage of giving the least possible trouble to all concerned. Its disadvantage is that it produces no results. The deans of the universities of Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, and Western Reserve report that under this plan deficient students are rarely found.

Another simple remedy is to keep a student in the prescribed course in composition till he attains a satisfactory standard. Theoretically this is the universal practice. But our own experience points to the possibility of a student's escaping before he has become thoroughly habituated in the writing and speaking of correct English. We know that an instructor may be human. A student who works hard and faithfully and at the end of a year succeeds in writing a page free from the grosser errors of grammar and sentence structure will be rewarded with a passing grade because the instructor feels that the student has learned *something* and that corresponding attainment in another subject would be certain of similar recognition. This success, painfully and barely attained, offers no security against a relapse as soon as the eye of the teacher of composition is withdrawn.

To guard against this tendency the University of Kansas has established a rule whereby credit for the prescribed course in rhetoric is granted provisionally and is subject to cancellation whenever two or more of a student's instructors make adverse reports. If the action is indorsed by the department of English, the student must repeat the prescribed course. On the face of it this procedure seems both cumbersome and uncertain. There is no evidence of the existence of enough machinery to make its operation equitable and effective. There is a certain embarrassment involved in requiring the department of English to revise its former judgment; and to make a student who suffers from some special ailment in composition repeat a course of normal treatment through which he has already passed ordinarily means a great waste of time for both student and teacher. The University of Cincinnati has a rule like that of Kansas, but it provides special subfreshmen sections for delinquents.

A practice similar to that of Kansas exists also in the University of Chicago but with the alternative provision that a student instead of being forced to repeat the fundamental course is required to take additional work in composition. The latter practice is also employed at the University of Wisconsin, and apparently it gives satisfaction neither there nor at the University of Chicago. The objections are obvious, for it is not possible for an instructor in an advanced

course to devote much time to elementary deficiencies, and the work of the normal student must suffer needlessly from the presence of the others.

The adoption of the various remedies already described is clearly not due to any conviction of their efficacy but is merely an effort to utilize the means at hand. It is no doubt fully realized that what many deficient students need is something in the way of special tutoring, but few universities have felt prepared to assume the burden. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology has, to be sure, provided a special course for the extreme cases, and at Yale an "awkward squad" has been organized under Professor Tinker, but these schemes are only partial in their operation. The dean of Yale College reports that the plan is difficult to apply to upper classmen.

Since the effective method of treating the deficient student is well enough understood, the problem reduces itself to devising a method which shall enable the college to reach such a student and to apply the needed remedy. It becomes a question of setting in motion enough machinery to make it reasonably certain that bad writing shall be reported and shall receive the necessary attention after being reported. Three years ago Harvard put into operation a plan which, according to its two annual reports, has worked satisfactorily. This plan has been adopted at the Universities of California and Texas and at Grinnell College. Wherever it has been tried it seems to have realized the most confident expectations of its sponsors. It has therefore seemed best to your subcommittee to outline the essential features of this plan and to recommend it to you for your adoption.

(The recommendations of the subcommittee were substantially the same as those submitted by the Committee.)

It is claimed for this plan that the mere advertisement of its existence brings about an improvement in the quality of English used on the campus by eliminating those faults that are due to negligence alone. It does not place any burden upon the instructors, since they are not expected to correct the English of their students but only to notify the Committee of the unsatisfactory cases. If, as the second report of the Harvard Committee (May, 1917) indicates, some instructors do make the problem their own and choose to supplement the work of the department of English, no harm is thereby done. The one difficulty inherent in the plan, the probable apathy of instructors in making reports, has not so far been found a serious one. Both reason and experience point to the likelihood of any student falling into at least one course each term where the quality of his English will be a matter of interest to the instructor. If the difficulty should develop, a remedy for it could doubtless be found.

These recommendations were carefully considered at a recent meeting of the faculty of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, were adopted with some slight modifications, and were transmitted to the University Senate, which also approved them.